

Reinventing Christianity

Nineteenth-century contexts

Edited by
LINDA WOODHEAD

Ashgate

Aldershot • Burlington USA • Singapore • Sydney

© Linda Woodhead 2001

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hampshire GU11 3HR
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
131 Main Street
Burlington, VT 05401-5600 USA

Ashgate website: http://www.ashgate.com
--

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Reinventing Christianity : nineteenth-century contexts

1. Church history – 19th century

I. Woodhead, Linda

270.81

Library of Congress Control Number: 00-110599

ISBN 0 7546 1650 9

Printed in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin Cornwall

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>List of Contributors</i>	ix

Introduction	1
<i>Linda Woodhead</i>	

PART ONE: VARIETIES

I Transcendent Christianity

1. Evangelical Certainties: Charles Spurgeon and the Sermon as Crisis Literature	27
<i>Andrew Tate</i>	
2. Fortress Catholicism: The Art of Ultramontanist at Notre Dame de Fourvière	37
<i>Nancy Davenport</i>	
3. Anglican Controversies: Debating Private Confession	67
<i>Anne Hartman</i>	

II Liberal Christianity and Alternative Spiritualities

4. The World's Parliament of Religions and the Rise of Alternative Spirituality	81
<i>Linda Woodhead</i>	
5. The Swedenborgian Church in England	97
<i>Ian Sellers</i>	
6. Transcendentalists and Catholic Converts in Emerson's America	105
<i>Shannon Cate</i>	

PART TWO: NEGOTIATIONS

III Christianity and Literature

7. Rewriting Genesis: The Nineteenth-Century Roots of D.H. Lawrence's Religion	119
<i>Terence R. Wright</i>	
8. Wordsworth and the Sacralization of Place	127
<i>DeeAnne Westbrook</i>	

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 9. Reactionary and Romantic: Joseph de Maistre and Shelley
<i>Arthur Bradley</i> | 139 |
| 10. The Religion of Thomas Carlyle
<i>Trevor Hogan</i> | 149 |

IV Christianity and Gender

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 11. The Feminization of Piety in Nineteenth-Century Art
<i>Jane Kristof</i> | 165 |
| 12. Women's Theology and the British Periodical Press
<i>Julie Melnyk</i> | 191 |
| 13. The Feminist Theology of Florence Nightingale
<i>Hilary Fraser and Victoria Burrows</i> | 199 |
| 14. Elizabeth Gaskell, Gender and the Apocalypse
<i>Robert M. Kachur</i> | 211 |

V Christianity and Science

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 15. Science and Secularization
<i>John Hedley Brooke</i> | 229 |
| 16. Contextualising the 'War' between Science and Religion
<i>Gowan Dawson</i> | 239 |
| 17. Philip Gosse and the Varieties of Natural Theology
<i>Jonathan Smith</i> | 251 |

Conclusion <i>Linda Woodhead</i>	263
-------------------------------------	-----

<i>References</i>	269
<i>Index</i>	287

Chapter Thirteen

The Feminist Theology of Florence Nightingale

Hilary Fraser and Victoria Burrows

Florence Nightingale's three-volume *Suggestions for Thought to the Searchers after Truth Among the Artizans of England*, written between 1850 and 1852, revised after her return in 1856 from the Crimea, and privately printed in 1860, makes a distinctively feminist intervention in the religious controversies of the 1850s.¹ In it, Nightingale offers a radical diagnosis of the fragmented contemporary spiritual and cultural condition, relating the fractures and fissures of modernity to the material conditions of women's lives. Fundamental to her argument is a recognition of layers of cultural difference: of the class difference that distinguishes the 'artizans' whom she addresses in the first volume of her work from the wealthy who are the subject of the subsequent volumes; and, crucially, of the gender difference that sets apart the life experiences of mothers and daughters and sisters from those of fathers and sons and brothers. She also acknowledges the imperatives of intellectual and sectarian difference, both within the Church, and between the faithful and those, including 'most of the educated among the operatives', who 'have turned their faces to atheism or at least to theism' (p. 8). Difference is, moreover, textually inscribed. *Suggestions for Thought* is nothing if not fragmentary. It is the site of competing discourses: of law and freedom, for instance, of obedience and resistance. Furthermore, in its very language and form, in the disjunct and multivocal urgency of its delivery, it exemplifies Nightingale's perception of the atomism of contemporary culture. But her passionate and erratic ruminations upon religion, society and the gender order are given coherence by a unifying discourse of the body that underwrites her thesis advocating a recovery of social cohesiveness through a recognition of diversity, and interestingly anticipates the intervention into medical history that, by the time of the book's private publication, will have come to define her popular reputation. Contemptuous of the domestic and patriarchal paradigm favoured by most writers on contemporary society and the Church, Nightingale proposes an alternative model for the nation and its religion that validates the individual, permits women to engage in work beyond the confines of the home, and radically redefines the ideal of 'the family of God'. 'We want to extend the family', she maintains, 'not annihilate it' (p. 179). This paper will investigate Nightingale's vision of a religion feminized and reconfigured in such a way as to legitimate and foreshadow her own transgressive incursion into the public sphere.

We want to begin by thinking about this female writer's strategies for entering a discourse from which women have traditionally been excluded. First of all, it is

interesting to consider the ways in which the ideological categories of public and private, to which religious debate and women were, in the period, respectively consigned, are rhetorically collapsed in Nightingale's own discursive practices. She insists throughout *Suggestions for Thought* that '[t]hese two questions of religion and family are so intimately connected that to ask concerning the higher power or powers acknowledged in heaven and on earth is one' (p. 156). Such intimacies are textually enacted in writing that illustrates a theological point with a domestic example, that articulates a philosophical argument in an agonisingly personal voice, that moves between the dispassionate objective observation and the enraged subjective commentary with an ease that refuses the notion that either women and religion, or the personal and the political, occupy separate discursive categories.

Comparing the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church in terms of the extent to which they exercise authority, for instance, Nightingale writes of those paradigmatically patriarchal institutions:

The Church of England is expected to be an over-idle mother, who lets her children entirely alone, because those made her who had found the Church of Rome an over-busy mother. *She* imprisoned us; she read our letters; she penetrated our thoughts; she regulated what we were to do every hour; she asked us what we had been doing and thinking; she burnt us if we had been thinking wrong. We found her an over active mother, and we made the Church of England, which does not 'interfere' with her children at all. (p. 84)

Through the use of such figures, women are made to preside matriarchally and metaphorically over a domesticated Church which, when it comes to historical women, 'will not have them', because '[s]he does not know what to do with them' (p. 88). The sexual economy of 'separate spheres' is similarly unsettled by Nightingale's abrupt analogies between religious history and the contemporary social position of women. Rarely are such parallels explicitly signalled, nor are they tactfully ushered in; rather they take the form of a vigorous, dialectically structured critique. Typically a religious point is succeeded by an urgent questioning that troubles, rhetorically, the notion that the institutions and discourses of Christianity should or can be dissociated from women's lives, as in the following:

Christ's temptation is the epitome of all life, as it was, no doubt, the epitome of his own, which he told to his disciples in that form. A sensitive, noble spirit could perhaps hardly bear to speak of it in any other form.

Do we not live for 'forty days', often for as many years, in the wilderness, seeking bread and finding none? Have we not lived these many years trying to find bread in society, in the literary dawdling of a civilized life, in the charitable trifling of a benevolent life, in the selfish elegance of an artistic life? Have we not, in these deserts, these long, long weary years, tried to pick up food, and at last, craving and despairing of anything better, have we not eaten that which was not bread, applause and sympathy, for that which is not good, the vulgar distinction of social praise, the temporary forgetfulness of excitement? (p. 125)

We will return to Nightingale's extraordinarily powerful evocation of what she terms 'this life of starvation', but here we simply want to note how brilliantly she destabilizes the ideological binaries that traditionally exclude women from religious discourse through her subversive use of metaphorical language. Through an

audacious reconfiguration of typology, *Christ* is represented as a type of the suffering modern *woman*.

'People are hardly aware', Nightingale writes, 'of the very great importance of the present phase of religious and domestic life, of the change going on, of the want of a Saviour, for this hour of peculiar trial' (p. 155), drawing attention at once to the interconnectedness of the religious and the domestic, and to the critical historical moment. Given the changes in women's position in society that have taken place over the past fifty years, she argues, '[I]t is the time for a few among the speculative and discontented to listen to more enlarged views of religion and to a life consistent with these' (p. 203). She identifies the age as one of fragmentation, one in which (using a characteristically domestic metaphor for spiritual crisis) 'atheism and indifference are man and wife' (p. 118). But it is a fragmentation that is felt on the pulse. She writes of women's sense of self-division ('there is no longer unity between the woman as inwardly developed, and as outwardly manifested' (p. 228)), as well as of how their motivation and energies are dissipated by the cultural constraints upon them: 'If I knew how, I ... would have a *single aim* of righteousness, and love, and benevolence, and beauty, and order; but I have a different aim every half-hour, without comprehensiveness, connexion, consistency' (p. 26). She is preoccupied with the way in which the fractured condition of modern civilization is mirrored in the disjointed nature of women's existence, and rails against 'the maxim of doing things at "odd moments"':

When people give this advice, it sounds as if they said, 'Don't take any regular meals. But be very careful of your spare moments for eating. Be always ready to run into the kitchen and snatch a slice of bread and butter at odd times. But never sit down to your dinner, you can't, you know'. We know what can be done at odd times, a little worsted work, acquiring a language, copying something, putting the room to rights, mending a hole in your glove. What else is there? I don't know. Nothing requiring original thought: nothing, it is evident, which requires a form, a completeness, a beginning and an end, a whole, which cannot be left off 'at any time' without injury to it, which is not 'mere copying', in short. (pp. 71-2)

The submerged wordplay, which leads us from mending a hole in a glove to making a whole of a woman's life, suggests what is lost in the interstices of a woman's piecemeal day. And again there is that pervasive metaphor of hunger, here with disconcertingly modern overtones of (typically female) eating disorders. Nightingale demands answers of the institution that so conspicuously fails to provide for women who, forced to pass their lives under the regime of the odd moment, are cruelly deprived of a sense of personal integrity and fulfilment: 'For such women what does the Church of England do?' (p. 133). Her foregrounding of female subjectivity, and her poignant evocation of women's experiences of dislocation and alienation in this text make it clear that, in her view, the Church of England must address that particular 'woman question' before it can hope to overcome the disunities and fissures in its own fabric. 'The improvement of religion and society must go together', Nightingale contends, and specifically, she asks, '[t]he relation between parents and daughters, its nature, and how practically it should be worked out - how is this to be referred to the nature of God?' (pp. 174-5).

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's feminist heroine-poet Aurora Leigh similarly emphasises, at about the same date (1856), the connectedness of 'the natural' and the spiritual; she describes 'The great below clenched by the great above,/Shade here authenticating substance there,/The body proving spirit, as the effect/The cause' (*Aurora Leigh*, Bk 8, ll. 622–5). For Barrett Browning too, of course, the material conditions of women's lives provided a conduit to the spiritual. In ways that interestingly anticipate, by example, modern feminist critiques of the phallogentric mind/body duality by which woman is constituted as the negative 'other' of the valorised masculine mind, both writers insist upon the embodied subjectivity of women, and their claim to an intellectual and spiritual life.² Nightingale does not, like Barrett Browning in her construction of Marian Erle in *Aurora Leigh*, make an angel of her fallen woman, but she does unsettle the boundaries between 'good' and 'bad' women: 'The woman who has sold herself for an establishment, in what is she superior to those we may not name?', she asks (p. 266). Elsewhere she explicitly identifies the point of connection between the woman in the gutter and the woman in the drawing-room as the client of the one and the husband of the other:

What has 'society' done for us?...What does it do for fallen women? ...What protection does she give those wretched women? What constraint does she put upon those men who make them what they are? Does she ever turn a shy look upon them? Not at all. On the contrary, she throws open her doors wide to them, vicious as they are, and ... says to the woman, 'Get out of my path'. While to him without whom the woman would not have been vicious, she offers her drawing-rooms and her high-bred daughters. (pp. 128–9)

Nightingale's text also troubles the boundaries, so stoutly defended by contemporary social commentators such as the egregious W.R. Greg,³ between male and female desire, and between legitimacy and illegitimacy:

Society takes pleasure in stimulating passion in every kind of way, by early excess in wine, late hours, schoolboy conversation and classical books, etc., etc., and then says, 'you must not gratify this in a legitimate way, under pain of exciting our censure – the illegitimate satisfaction is the only one we allow'. ...

And we who are not 'fallen women', we talk about mankind creating mankind, – what has mankind done for us? It has created wants which not only it does not afford us the opportunity of satisfying, but which it compels us to disguise and deny. (p. 129)

At the close of this passage, Nightingale adverts to a trope, alluded to already, that is a recurring motif in this text, one that affords an intriguing instance of how she resists the conventional dualism of mind and body:

[Society] says, if any one dies of hunger, 'you must not starve – so and so shall be punished if you do'; or 'you shall be provided for at the expense of society'. But it never says, 'you shall not starve spiritually – you must not want the bread of life – so and so shall be punished if you do, if you lack the satisfactions which are as necessary to the faculties and feelings as food is to the physical wants'. (p. 130)

By way of a constellation of images associated with food, appetite, hunger and starvation, Nightingale brings before the reader, in arrestingly graphic detail, the

state of moral and intellectual malnutrition to which women have been systematically reduced.⁴ Paradoxically, the physical body is summoned up in all its material actuality in support of an argument that women should not be valorised for their bodies:

To have no food for our heads, no food for our hearts, no food for our activity, is that nothing? If we have no food for the body, how we do cry out, how all the world hears of it, how all the newspapers talk of it, with a paragraph headed in great capital letters, DEATH FROM STARVATION! But suppose one were to put a paragraph in the 'Times', *Death of Thought from Starvation*, or *Death of Moral Activity from Starvation*, how people would stare, how they would laugh and wonder! One would think we had no heads nor hearts, by the total indifference of the public towards them. Our bodies are the only things of any consequence. (p. 220)

Variations on the metaphor of starvation, a recurring trope in nineteenth-century women's writing, as Gilbert and Gubar have argued (1979), reinforce the image of woman as starving in that 'desert for the heart', her home. She sees mirages, that offer 'the appearance of food which disappears whenever you stretch out your hand to take it' (pp. 151–2). Another trope that is eloquent of the degrading denial of autonomy to women represents them as subjected to forced feeding. Not once, but twice in the text, being read aloud to is compared to a form of torture that brings to mind the treatment of hunger-striking suffragettes early in this century (see Showalter (1987, p. 130) and Gagnier (1988, p. 31)). 'Don't you feel', Nightingale asks, 'when you are being read to, as if a pailful of water were being poured down your throat, which, but that it comes up again just as it goes down, would suffocate you?' (p. 74). It is a horrific image of a woman gagging on her own enforced passivity and dependency:

It is like lying on one's back, with one's hands tied and having liquid poured down one's throat. Worse than that, because suffocation would immediately ensue and put a stop to this operation. But no suffocation would stop the other. (p. 213)

Starvation and suffocation are, for Nightingale, apt metaphors for her society's denial and repression of female desire; appetite, or rather hunger, not for the 'Dinner' that, contemptuously echoing writers such as Isabella Beeton, she describes as 'the great sacred ceremony of this day, the great sacrament' (p. 210) in the well-regulated middle-class household, but for the truly great and the truly sacred that are travestied in the secular ritual. As in so much writing by nineteenth-century women, female desire is positively voracious in this text, embracing many passions, and taking many forms, its very ubiquitousness contesting the commonly-held notion, scornfully reiterated by Nightingale, that 'women have no passions' (p. 206). Vocational desire, in particular, is experienced with a libidinal intensity that sustains an extraordinary textual dynamic, drawing together the various elements of this diffuse and disjointed text, and propelling the argument with an irresistible logic. Critiquing Freudian and Lacanian models of desire as lack, Elizabeth Grosz has proposed a counter-theory of desire as 'not a lack but a positive force of production ... a force or energy which creates links between objects, which makes things, forges alliances, produces connections' (1989, p. xvi). *Suggestions for Thought* can be productively read against such a formulation, for it seems that it is

through the textual articulation of desire that Nightingale 'produces connections', mends fractures, in a disarticulated world.

If the multiple discourses and fractured delivery of Nightingale's *Suggestions* are given coherence by a rhetoric of desire, bodily tropes may be said to perform a similar function. Nightingale criticises the 'learned men' who 'discuss together free will, necessity, the origin of evil, God's purpose, the most momentous questions of man's destiny ...[as] a mere matter of intellectual amusement', observing that '[i]t would not have been so had it been a search into man's muscles and arteries' (p. 195). Indeed, throughout the work, she draws parallels between 'theological science' and 'medical science' and 'sanitary science', to the disadvantage of the former (p. 193). It is perhaps because, as she points out, in this society '[w]e set the treatment of bodies so high above the treatment of souls' (p. 217) that Nightingale so often recurs to the body as a rhetorical strategy. Her language is strikingly corporeal, particularly in her representation of female suffering. Twice she refers to the practice of foot binding, which meant that 'the Chinese woman ... could not make use of her feet' (pp. 220–1): "'Suffering, sad" female "humanity"! What are these feelings which [women] are taught to consider disgraceful, to deny to themselves? What form do the Chinese feet assume when denied their proper development?" (p. 206). Elsewhere, a woman's crooked finger, the result of her refusal as a child to let her nurse change a dressing, is made to signify her disabled intellectual and social condition: 'And what is a deformed or crippled finger compared with a deformed or crippled *life*?' (p. 68). Nightingale deploys violent metaphors to shock:

'Robbed and murdered' we read in the newspapers. The crime is horrible. But there are people being robbed and murdered continually before our eyes, and no man sees it. 'Robbed' of their time, if robbing means taking away that which you do not wish to part with, slowly 'murdered' by their families. There is scarcely any one who cannot, in his own experience, remember some instance where some amiable person has been slowly put to death at home, aye, and at an estimable and virtuous home. (p. 70)

In variations on the theme, she describes how women are submitted to the torture of 'solitary confinement' (p. 149), and are turned into lunatics by their families ('[i]n fact, in almost every family, one sees a keeper, or two or three keepers, and a lunatic' (p. 137)).

As will be apparent, the body in this text is a site of pain and suffering, some of it imposed by the keepers and jailers of the family, some self-inflicted: '[w]e fast mentally, scourge ourselves morally, use the intellectual hair-shirt ... mortifying vanity ... ' (p. 207). Nightingale's strategy is, though, to turn pain to advantage, to apotheosise the figure of the suffering woman, to claim for her the status of martyr. In general terms, she demands the right to suffer, as preferable to the anaesthetism of feelings: 'Give us back our suffering, we cry to Heaven in our hearts – suffering rather than indifferentism; ... better have pain than paralysis!' (p. 208). More specifically, she writes her own script. Concluding a comparison of a bird, 'which builds its nest unerringly with a smaller range of faculties', with a man, 'wanting and suffering ... before his habitation was skilfully built', she expresses the hope that 'the bird, in another mode of existence, may rise to learn through suffering' (p. 19), like a man. Inevitably, in popular representations of her following her

intervention at the hospital at Scutari, Nightingale was frequently figured as a bird, as we can see from a series of contemporary poems and images from *Punch*. In a poem entitled 'Scutari', for instance, the anonymous poet rhapsodises:

Lady – thy very name so sweet,
Speaks of full songs through darkness heard,
And fancy findeth likeness meet
Between thee and the bird,

Whose music cheers the glooming wold,
As thy low voice the anguish dim,
That through these sad rooms lieth cold
On brain and heart and limb.
(*Punch*, or *The London Charivari*, 28, 1855, p. 61.)

In an illustration of 'The "Jug" of the Nightingale' (Figure 13.1; *Punch*, 27, 1854, p. 215), Nightingale is represented in the image of her ornithological namesake, flying to the rescue with her 'jug' (playing on the term for the distinctive note of the nightingale), full of fomentations, embrocations and gruel. And, picking up the theme, in the anonymous poem, 'The Nightingale's Song to the Sick Soldier', as again the elaboration on the nightingale as songbird suggests, she is depicted as bringing harmony to the chaos and disorder of war:

Listen, soldier, to the tale of the tender NIGHTINGALE,
'Tis a charm that soon will ease your wounds so cruel,
Singing medicine for your pain, in a sympathising strain,
With a jug, jug, jug of lemonade or gruel...

Singing pillow for you smoothed, smart and ache and anguish soothed,
By the readiness of feminine invention;
Singing fever's thirst allayed, and the bed you've tumbled, made,
With a careful and considerate attention.

Singing succour to the brave, and a rescue from the grave,
Hear the NIGHTINGALE that's come to the Crimea,
'Tis a NIGHTINGALE as strong in her heart as in her song,
To carry out so gallant an idea.
(*Punch*, 27, 1854, p. 184)

Elsewhere, she becomes an 'immortal bird', as in portrayals of her presiding over her nurses' angelic ministrations to the sick and wounded (Figure 13.2; *Punch*, 27, 1854, p. 194). Here, the wings of the bird assume a distinctly other-worldly status, as the angel in the house becomes an angel at the front.

In *Suggestions for Thought*, Florence Nightingale writes herself into history, authorizing her desire to escape from '[t]he prison which is called a family' (p. 119) and take her place in public life, and carving out a place for herself as a modern-day Messiah. Throughout the text she reiterates her belief that the fragmented modern world is in need of 'saviours', of redemption through suffering, and at the same time compellingly describes the suffering of women, like herself, caught in 'the trammels of conventional life' (p. 170). George Landow has written very

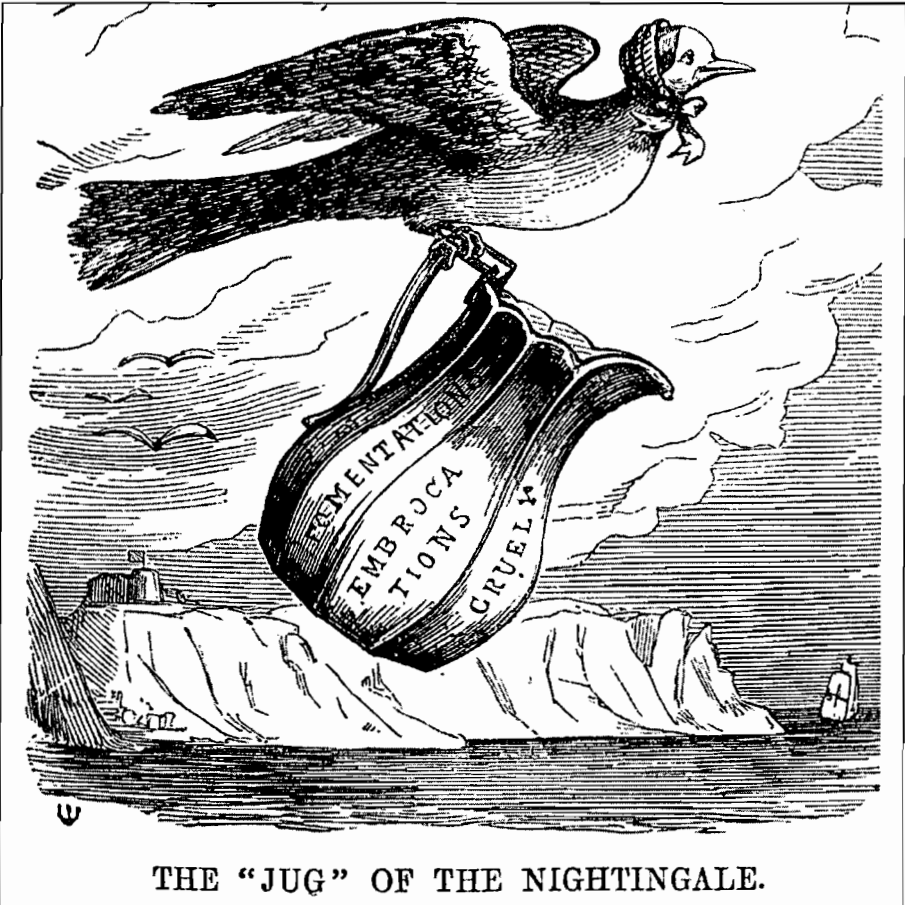


Figure 13.1 The "Jug" of the Nightingale, *Punch*, 27, 1854, p. 125.

interestingly about Nightingale's subversion of biblical, as well as Greek, mythology in *Cassandra*, focusing particularly upon her rewriting of the passage from scripture in the epigraph 'The voice of one crying in the crowd, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord"', in order 'to claim for herself the position of a female John the Baptist preparing the way for a female Christ' (Landow, 1990, p. 42). Oddly, though, given his important study of typology in Victorian literature, art and thought, *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows* (1980), he does not comment on the pervasive references elsewhere in *Suggestions for Thought* to the absence of a modern type of the saviour. People fritter away their lives 'because they have no type before them' (p. 68), Nightingale complains. 'How can nations improve ... if they have no type before them?' (p. 76), she demands. '[W]ithout a type before one of what human nature may become', she asks, 'how can any one work?' (p. 131). This emphasis on the type is a further manifestation of Nightingale's insistence



Figure 13.2 “Immortal Bird”, *Punch*, 27, 1854, p. 194.

upon the connectedness of the physical and the spiritual, the signifier and the signified. The paradigmatic exemplum of spirit made flesh is, of course, Christ, described in *Aurora Leigh* as having ‘come into our flesh./As some wise hunter creeping on his knees/With a torch, into the blackness of a cave,/To face and quell the beast there – take the soul,/And so possess the whole man, body and soul’ (*Aurora Leigh*, Bk 8, ll. 546–50). Increasingly outrageously, and inverting the fundamental principles of typology (whereby people and events are read as the material embodiment and divinely intended anticipation of Christ), Nightingale suggests that Christ’s crucifixion was as nothing compared with the suffering of women: ‘Suppose one says, How much worse not to strive to save thousands from a crucified *spirit* than to crucify one body, thereby transferring that lofty spirit to some other reign of God’s universe!’ (p. 202). Combining the idea of the biblical type with that of the biological type, the type of the evolving species, somewhat in the manner of Tennyson in his apotheosis of Arthur Hallam in *In Memoriam* (1850), Nightingale triumphantly proclaims:

The more complete a woman’s organization, the more she will feel it, till at last there shall arise a woman, who will resume, in her own soul, all the sufferings of her race, and that woman will be the Saviour of her race. (p. 227)

At the very time that William Holman Hunt was painting that icon of Protestantism *The Light of the World* (which was, interestingly, like *Suggestions for*

Thought, begun in 1851–53, and retouched in 1858), the woman who was herself to become iconised as ‘the Lady with the Lamp’ announces ‘The next Christ will perhaps be a female Christ’ (p. 230). In the poems referred to, she is represented in such a role, insofar as she rescues soldiers from the grave and is said to ‘do’ ‘what Christ preached’. Other texts invoke her Christ-like qualities. Harriet Martineau, for instance, in the obituary she wrote when it was thought that Florence Nightingale was dying from a fever contracted in the Crimea, praises her as ‘the nurse, and the dispenser of comfort and relief’, and pictures her ‘dressing wounds, bringing wine and food, carrying the lamp through miles of sick soldiers in the middle of the night, noting every face, and answering the appeal of every eye as she passed’ – a picture confirmed by visual representations of the Barrack Hospital, Scutari. Martineau writes, ‘We think to-day of the little Russian prisoner, the poor boy who could not speak or be spoken to till she had taken him in, and had taught him and made him useful; and how he answered when at length he could understand a question. When asked if he knew where he would go when he was dead, he confidently said: “I shall go to Miss Nightingale”’ (Yates, 1985, pp. 196–7). Dispensing bread and wine and light from her lamp to Britain’s Christian soldiers among the infidels, yet taking her place alongside the Almighty in heaven, Nightingale does indeed seem to have featured in the public imagination as a kind of female Christ.

A prominent theme that emerges from such representations of Florence Nightingale is of a woman who creates order and coherence out of chaos and fragmentation. Until she appeared in the Crimea, Britain’s affairs were represented as being in the hands of a disorderly housewife (Figure 13.3),⁵ who presides over a scene of disarray, and whose candle has gone out. By contrast, Nightingale brings a sense of calm and peace to the poorly-governed household of the nation, as is signified in the many contemporary portrayals of ‘the Lady with the Lamp’ at Scutari. But, significantly, her talent for organization is figured as practical, rather than abstract and intellectual, and womanly, an extension into the public sphere of qualities which are constructed as domestic and feminine. It might perhaps be useful at this point to turn to the views of the person who most famously debunked the saintly image of ‘the Lady with the Lamp’, Lytton Strachey. In his witty and influential brief biography of Nightingale in *Eminent Victorians* (1918), Strachey alternately monsters and ridicules his subject, saving his most disparaging remarks for her excursions into theological speculation in *Suggestions for Thought*. It is clear that he considered her to be ill-qualified to write on philosophical matters, and he lampoons her attempts to unravel, ‘in the course of three portly volumes, the difficulties – hitherto, curiously enough, unsolved – connected with such matters as Belief in God, the Plan of Creation, the Origin of Evil, the Future Life, Necessity and Free Will, Law, and the Nature of Morality’. He renders ludicrous both her hubristic intellectual ambition and her unorthodox materialist perspective: ‘She felt towards [God] as she might have felt towards a glorified sanitary engineer; and in some of her speculations she seems hardly to distinguish between the Deity and the Drains’. In short, he dismisses her as being ‘simply an empiricist’, concluding that ‘[h]er mind was, indeed, better qualified to dissect the concrete and distasteful fruits of actual life than to construct a coherent system of abstract philosophy’ (Strachey, 1948, pp. 153–5). Such a division between ‘concrete ... actual life’ and a



Figure 13.3 *The Disorderly Housewife*, Marshall, 1992, p. 106.

‘coherent system of abstract philosophy’, like Strachey’s mockery of the inappropriate and disruptive incursion of the personal into the theological argument, reinstates the very gendered categories that Nightingale’s text is at pains to subvert. His criticisms, indeed, give the modern reader a lively sense of the gendered assumptions that a woman with aspirations to participate in public intellectual debate had to negotiate.

Mary Poovey has commented that ‘[o]ne of the most pressing theoretical issues facing feminists today is conceptualizing the complex relationship between “real” women – women as historical agents – and woman – the historically specific representation of the female that mediates the relationship of women and men to every individual, concrete woman’ (1990, p. 29). That relationship is particularly complicated in the case of Florence Nightingale, whose self-representation was always so governed by strategy, and whose public construction by others was so imbricated in contemporary ideologies of gender, sexuality, domesticity, class and imperialism. Various constructed as ‘a housewifely woman’ (Yates, p. 202), a ministering angel, and a saint, Nightingale was empowered to take a role in public affairs equalled, among women, only by the Queen. Poovey herself has persuasively analysed how Nightingale’s own later writings on nursing authorized the persistent misrepresentations that characterized the mythology that grew up around her as

soon as she entered the public space, and 'capitalized on the contradiction inherent in the domestic ideal in order to make even more radical claims for women than contemporary feminists did' (1988, p. 166). Always the opportunist, Nightingale, by this point elevated in hagiographical poems such as 'The Nightingale's Return' to the status of a saint ('our sweet Saint FLORENCE, modest, and still, and calm'),⁶ invokes in her writings on nursing, as Poovey argues, 'the asexual, apparently classless image of woman by which her own exploits were publicly represented', the domestic ideal of 'the orderly, happy, middle-class home', and the institution of the family (1988, pp. 185, 190). It seems a far cry from the rage with which she exposed such ideological constructions in *Suggestions for Thought*. Whether it was a matter of strategy, or whether because the only language available to Nightingale to further her project of professionalizing nursing was so inescapably inflected by contemporary assumptions about the class and gender order that it was impossible to articulate her proposals in any other way, Nightingale's later writings both were considerably more conservative publications than *Suggestions for Thought* and reached a much wider audience. Such are the gains, and the costs, perhaps, of mending fractures. If *Suggestions for Thought* lacks coherence, it is because its first priority is to register fragmentation and difference. Benjamin Jowett criticised the book for being 'full of antagonisms', yet Nightingale did not take up his suggestions for how 'these could be softened' (Woodham-Smith, 1951, p. 350). Insofar as it does have coherence, it is a coherence conferred not by masculinist 'abstract philosophy' or by universalising ideology, but rather, as this paper has attempted to argue, by the desiring embodied female subject. Insofar as fractures are mended, they are the fractures that divide a woman from herself, and they are healed in the pursuit, to quote Nightingale, of 'unity between the woman as inwardly developed and outwardly manifested' (p. 228).

Notes

- 1 All references in parenthesis, except where otherwise stated, are to *Florence Nightingale: Cassandra and other Selections from Suggestions for Thought*, ed. Mary Poovey. London: Pickering and Chatto, 1991.
- 2 See Cranny-Francis (1995, Introduction) for a useful critical overview of the literature. On the retheorization of the relation between the mind and the body see, in particular, Grosz (1994).
- 3 For an astute discussion of his article on 'the great social vice of Prostitution' in the *Westminster Review*, 53 (July, 1850): 238–68, see Poovey (1990).
- 4 Maud Ellmann (1993) notes that, 'Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud, in spite of their divergences, agree that eating is the origin of subjectivity. For it is by ingesting the external world that the subject establishes his body as his own, distinguishing its inside from its outside' (p. 30). Note too Helena Michie's (1987) argument that female hunger 'figures unspeakable desires for sexuality and power' (p. 13).
- 5 Reproduced in Marshall (1992, p. 106).
- 6 *Punch*, or *The London Charivari*, 31, 1856, p. 73.